

Parental Communication and Perceived Parental Attitudes about Sexuality among Turkish College Students

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ABSTRACT

This current study was conducted to examine parental communication and perceived parental attitudes about sexuality with respect to gender among Turkish college students. Moreover, attitudes toward premarital sexuality with respect to gender were explored. A demographic data form, premarital sexual permissiveness scale, parental communication about sexuality scale and parental attitudes about sexuality scale were administered to 366 (217 female and 148 male) college students, aged 18 to 26. The results indicated that females held more conservative premarital sexual attitudes than males; females talked to their mothers, while males talked to their fathers more about sexuality issues. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that gender was significant on the perceived maternal attitudes about sexuality, whereas perceived paternal attitudes about sexuality were not found to be significant with respect to gender. Future research is needed to explore variables that may contribute to the differences in parental communication and perceived parental attitudes about sexuality.

Key Words: Parental Communication, Perceived Parental Attitudes about Sexuality, Attitudes toward Premarital Sexuality, Gender

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INTRODUCTION

Although many western societies become more sexually liberal and gender differences continue to narrow, traditional sexual values and norms still prevail, especially for women in Turkish society (Parla, 2001; Aydın & Gülçat, 2006). Cultural values and attitudes about sexuality are favorable for males, while the social control on females' sexual lives is quiet strict in Turkey (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1982). Indeed, virginity is still accepted as the main indicator of purity and chastity and highly prioritized for women in the Turkish culture (Parla, 2001; Aydın & Gülçat, 2006). A research involving Turkish college students showed that older, politically more conservative, and less sexually experienced male and female participants disapprove of females' engaging in premarital sex. In addition, more highly educated males tend to disapprove of females' having premarital sex more so as compared to their female counterparts. Also, older, politically conservative, and less sexually experienced male participants reported that they would prefer to marry a virgin (Sakallı-Uğurlu & Glick, 2003). On the other hand, survey studies have demonstrated that the majority of Turkish college students become sexually experienced by age 20. Premarital sex is common, and they engage in a broad array of sexual behaviors, ranging from fantasy and self-stimulation to various forms of intercourse (Çok, Ersever & Gray, 1998). For instance, study on the sexual behaviors of the Turkish college students by Sümer-Hatipoğlu (2006b) showed that 38.5% of males and 21.9% of females had engaged in sexual intercourse in the past two years. In addition to the dramatic rise of sexual activity among young people in recent years, high rates of unsafe sexual behaviors were reported in research studies in Turkey (Çok, Ersever & Gray, 1998; Çok, Gray & Ersever, 2001; Korkmaz, 2001; Gökengin et al., 2003; Savaşer, 2003; Ozan, Aras, Semin & Orçin, 2005).

Although there have been evidences in the rise of premarital sex levels and risky sexual behaviors among even younger people, there are limited efforts for introducing formal sexuality education in Turkish public education system. Still, sexuality issues are not addressed in school curricula. Consequently, research suggests that young people obtain more of their sexuality information from informal sources (Topkaya, 2006; Gelbal, Duyan & Öztürk, 2008). Existing frameworks clearly show that parents play a central role in their childrens' sexuality education and socialization. One family process factor that has received a great deal of attention is parental communication about sexuality. Empirical evidence about children's socialization and value internalization reveals that parents teach their children about their value and behavioral expectations through their communication and behaviors, both directly and indirectly (Shtarkshall, Santelli & Hirsch, 2007).

Overall, findings from various research studies indicate that only a small number of children actually receive sexuality-related information from their parents in Turkey (Topkaya, 2006; Gelbal, Duyan & Öztürk, 2008). Limited conversation about sexuality-related issues is common within the Turkish family system in general. It is difficult for children to talk to their parents about sexuality, and the majority of parents, fathers in particular, are not comfortable about talking about sexuality-related issues with their children. Moreover, gender norms about sexuality impose different standards of sexual behaviors and attitudes for females and males in Turkey (Gelbal, Duyan & Öztürk, 2008).

Research studies on familial influences carried out in Western countries, as well as in Turkey, demonstrate there are some gender differences when comparing family factors; for instance, the results of a study conducted in the United States revealed that females and males differ in terms of the amount of sexual discussions with their parents. Specifically, it is known that females receive more information from their parents regarding sexuality-related

issues than males (Fischer, 1988). Moreover, it is more probable that daughters hear warnings and disapproving messages about sexuality, while they are less likely to hear the positive messages compared to their male counterparts (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). Past research carried out in the United States suggests mothers are the more likely parent to engage youngsters in sexual discussion, while sons may be less likely to talk to either parent about sexual issues (Dilorio, Kelley & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). The results of that same study suggest the most frequently discussed topics between mothers and females are menstrual cycle, STD/AIDS, dating and sexual behavior, pregnancy, and birth control. The least commonly discussed between mothers and male adolescents are wet dreams and what fathers think about teens having sex.

The results of the research conducted abroad, in which the relations between parental communication and sexuality have been examined, reveal that parent-child communication influences children's sexual attitudes, especially mother-daughter communication (Fisher, 1986). Fisher (1989) found that teens' perceiving their parents to be more liberal was related to females engaging in more sexual behavior, and communication between conservative parents and sons led to sons being more conservative themselves. In addition, the results of the study indicate that while females seem to be more influenced by family factors, males are affected more by individual factors (Werner-Wilson, 1998).

These kinds of gender differences in parental communication may also lead to gender differences in perceived parental attitudes among Turkish youngsters. While relatively few studies have examined the role of perceived parental attitudes and values on sexuality in Turkey, the results of a study demonstrated that female students perceived their parents' attitudes toward premarital sexuality more conservative than male students did, regardless of the socioeconomic status and education level of their parents (Şahin, 2005). Similarly, in a study that explored perceived parental attitudes about sexuality with respect to gender among Turkish college students, it also showed that females perceive their mothers more restrictive than their fathers. The results of the same study revealed a significant main effect for perceived paternal attitudes with respect to gender (Aşkun & Ataca, 2007).

The Present Study

Various disciplines, such as family sociology, demography, and social psychology indicate parents as important influences on sexual behaviors and attitudes of their children (Treboux & Busch-Rossnagel, 1995). Although it is inevitable that values and attitudes about sexuality are transmitted from parents to children and parents influence the adolescents a great deal about their sexual attitudes throughout the socialization process (Kotchick, Shaffer, Forehand & Miller, 2001), less attention has been paid to this subject in Turkey. Moreover, little information is available concerning gender differences. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the role of gender on attitudes toward premarital sexuality, parental communication, and perceived parental attitudes about sexuality among Turkish college students.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 366 undergraduate students, recruited on a voluntary basis. The participants in this research were students of a state university called Ege, located in western Turkey. Of the participants, 40.4% were male (148), and 59.3% were female (217) (1 unreported; 0.3%). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 26 with the mean age of 22.10 (SD

= 2.14). The participants' college classifications were as follows: 12.6% (46) freshman; 23.0% (84) sophomore; 26.2% (96) junior; and 38.0% (139) senior. More than half of them (57.9%) lived with both biological parents; almost one-third of them lived with their relatives (27.3%), 5.5% of them with their biological mother, 3.8% of them with their biological father, and 3.8% of them chose the other.

Measures

Demographic Information. The questions measuring demographic information included data on participant gender, age, major, class, number of siblings, whether they had sexual intercourse, age of first intercourse, and how they would describe their religious beliefs. Participants also responded to the item concerning involvement of the sexual behaviors.

Attitudes toward premarital sexuality. The Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Scale (PSPS) (Sprecher, 1989) was used to assess attitudes toward premarital sexuality in different relationships from casual to serious relationship contexts. PSPS was translated into Turkish by Askun (2000) by using translation-back translation method. Participants were asked to respond to each of the five items using a 5-point Likert-type scale in which 1 meant "definitely disagree" and 5 meant "definitely agree." The list began with the item, "I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me on a first date," and ended with the item, "I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me when I'm engaged to my partner." Analyses were conducted on the separate items of the scale and for an index that was created by combining the items. Cronbach's Alpha for the scale was .90 in the current study.

Parental communication about sexuality. Sexual communication with mothers and fathers were measured separately with a three-item scale, developed by a Turkish researcher (Askun, 2000). Examples of some of the items were "How often do you talk to your mother/father about sexuality?" and "How often do you talk to your mother or father on the wrong and right things about sexuality?" Participants were asked to respond to each of the three items using a 5-point rating scale in which 1 meant "always" and 5 meant "never." Items were combined to yield a total score. Higher scores represented greater amounts of communication with mothers or fathers. The internal consistency reliability for the scale was .74 for maternal .89 for paternal communication in the current study.

Perceived parental attitudes about sexuality. Perceived maternal and paternal attitudes about sexuality were measured separately by the Parental Attitudes about Sexuality Scale, which was developed by the Turkish researcher Askun (2000). The scale consisted of 10 questions about the parent's attitude about sexual matters such as "Would your mother or father approve of sexual relationship at a young age?" and "Would he or she allow you to experience sexual relationship?" Participants were asked to respond to each of the ten items, using a 5-point Likert-type scale, in which 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 5 meant "strongly agree." Higher scores indicated greater perception of parental restriction about sexuality. The internal consistency reliability was .77 for the perceived maternal attitudes and .75 for the perceived paternal attitudes about sexuality in the current study.

Procedure

The instruments were administered to the college students during the class sessions. During the data-collection process, the purpose of the study explained to all participants and they were ensured about confidentiality and subject anonymity. All participants were allowed to withdraw at any point.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included the use of descriptive statistics, independent *t*-tests, and MANOVA. Descriptive statistics were generated to develop the demographic profile of the participants. Independent samples *t* test analyses were used to determine differences in attitudes toward premarital sexuality and maternal and paternal communication between females and males. MANOVA was used to determine whether gender have an effect on perceived maternal and paternal attitudes about sexuality. Effect sizes were reported as *eta squared* (η^2). Conventionally, the values have been interpreted as small, medium and large effect sizes (.01, .06, and .14 respectively) (Stevens, 2002).

FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

The means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores of the study measures were presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for study measures

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
Attitudes toward premarital sexuality	12.87	6.47	5.00	25.00
Maternal communication	6.19	3.17	3.00	15.00
Paternal communication	4.43	2.03	3.00	15.00
Perceived maternal attitudes	25.51	7.88	10.00	45.00
Perceived paternal attitudes	23.02	7.53	10.00	45.00

The Role of Gender on Attitudes toward Premarital Sexuality

In order to examine the differences in attitudes toward premarital sexuality with respect to students' gender, an independent samples *t* test was performed. The results of the *t* test are presented in Table 2. The test that was conducted to evaluate the differences in attitudes toward premarital sexuality with respect to gender was significant, [$t_{(363)} = -9.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$]. The effect size was large. As can be seen in Table 2, the means of male students for attitudes toward premarital sexuality ($M = 16.25$, $SD = 6.01$) were greater than the means of female students ($M = 10.59$, $SD = 5.74$).

The Role of Gender on Parental Communication about Sexuality

In order to investigate the differences in maternal and paternal communication about sexuality with respect to students' gender, an independent samples *t* test was performed. The results of the *t* test are presented in Table 2. The test that was conducted to evaluate the differences in the maternal communication about sexuality with respect to gender was significant [$t_{(360)} = 7.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$]. The effect size was medium. As shown in Table 2, the means of female students for maternal communication about sexuality ($M = 7.10$, $SD = 3.37$) were greater than the means of male students ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 2.29$). Also, the test that was conducted to determine the differences in the paternal communication about sexuality with respect to gender was significant, $t_{(354)} = -4.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$. The effect size was medium. Counter to maternal communication about sexuality, the means of male students for paternal communication about sexuality ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 2.26$) were greater than the means of female students ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.74$).

Table 2. Comparison of gender differences on attitudes toward premarital sexuality and maternal and paternal communication about sexuality

	Gender		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Females	Males		
Attitudes	10.59 (5.74)	16.25 (6.01)	-9.06*	363
Maternal Communication	7.10 (3.37)	4.84 (2.29)	7.05*	360
Paternal Communication	4.01 (1.74)	5.04 (2.26)	-4.80*	354

Note* = $p < .001$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

The Role of Gender on Perceived Parental Attitudes about Sexuality

2 X 2 multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to explore the effect of the gender (female and male) on the two dependent variables (perceived maternal and paternal attitudes about sexuality). A preliminary examination of the result of MANOVA indicated a violation of the assumption of equal variances, and covariances Box's $F [70, 241874] = 1.66, p < .05$. Therefore, Pillai's Trace results were reported. The results demonstrated significant differences for gender, Pillai's Trace = .11, $F(2, 323) = 21.38, p = .000, \eta^2 = .11$.

An analysis of variances (ANOVA) on perceived parental attitudes was conducted as follow-up tests to the MANOVA. Type I error was controlled with using the Holm's Sequential Bonferroni method and each ANOVA was tested at the .025 level by dividing .05 to the number of dependent variables (Green & Salkind, 2003).

Univariate Analysis of Variance after MANOVA indicated that, gender was significant with respect to the perceived maternal attitudes about sexuality $F(1, 324) = 21.12, p = .000, \eta^2 = .06$, whereas perceived paternal attitudes about sexuality was not found to be significant $F(1, 324) = .008, p = .929$ with respect to gender. The results of the MANOVA are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of gender differences on perceived maternal and paternal attitudes

	Gender		<i>F</i>	η^2
	Females	Males		
Maternal Attitudes	27,01 (7,81)	22,98 (7,46)	21.12*	.06
Paternal Attitudes	23,01 (7,99)	23,09 (6,86)	.008	.00

Note* = $p < .001$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

As can be seen in Table 3, the means of female students for perceived maternal attitudes about sexuality ($M = 27.01, SD = 7.81$) were greater than the means of male students ($M = 22.98, SD = 7.46$). The strength of association between students' gender and perceived maternal attitudes about sexuality indicated a medium effect size. Female students perceived their mothers' attitudes about premarital sexuality more conservative than male students did.

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The aim of this study was to examine the role of gender on attitudes toward premarital sexuality, parental communication, and perceived parental attitudes about sexuality among Turkish college students.

The results of the current study regarding the role of gender on attitudes toward premarital sexuality replicated the previous study findings concerning the gender differences in premarital sexual attitudes. It was found out that females were less permissive regarding premarital sexuality. Researches from Western nations (such as the USA, Canada, and Australia) on individual factors regarding sexuality demonstrate that gender differences in sexual attitudes are one of the most consistent findings (Degaston, Weed & Jensen, 1996; Leiblum, Wiegel & Brickle, 2003). Males are more likely than females to have liberal attitudes toward sexuality. It is evident that there is still a “double standard” concerning young males’ and females’ sexuality in Turkey. It is more socially acceptable for men than women to engage in sexual behavior. Given the conservatism of Turkish society regarding sex related issues, it seems that cultural proscriptions against premarital sexuality regulate the attitudes toward premarital sexuality of females. Since sexuality is closely connected to marriage for females, it appears that social, cultural, and religious values concerning sexuality influence females’ attitudes toward premarital sexuality in more conservative fashion.

The findings of the current study demonstrate that daughters talked about sexuality related issues with their mothers more when compared to sons, while sons talked about sex related issues with their mothers more when compared to daughters. Although in the traditional Turkish family, fathers are not the main source of information about sexuality, and fathers usually do not discuss sexuality-related issues with their children when compared to mothers, this finding confirms that parent-child interaction and communication about sexuality differ with respect to gender (Botchway, 2004). Females’ and males’ having different kinds of experiences concerning sexual development might provide one explanation for the differences between mother-daughter and father-son sexual communication. It might have been easier for daughters to discuss sexuality-related issues with their mothers as they also experienced those developmental stages and vice versa (Dilorio, Kelley & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). Similarly, a study conducted in the United States demonstrated that a son's pubertal development was a significant predictor of both information sharing and, to a lesser extent, values sharing, with fathers more likely to talk with sons who had attained more physical development. They indicated that the father’s recognition of his son's physical development seems to be a crucial factor in talking about sexuality (Lehr, Demi, Dilorio & Facticeau, 2005).

The results of the current study show that perceived maternal attitudes about sexuality differ with respect to students’ gender, whereas the results show no significant difference with respect to gender in perceived paternal attitudes about sexuality. These findings indicate that female students perceived their mothers’ attitudes toward premarital sexuality more conservative than male students did. This result is consistent with the findings of the previous researches conducted in Turkey (Şahin, 2005; Askun & Ataca, 2007). The finding of past research, conducted in the United States, suggests that mothers may be the primary source of parent-adolescent communication about sex, particularly for daughters (Dilorio, Kelley & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). In the same vein, in Turkish culture, mothers’ being more involved in the sexual education and socialization of their daughters may have led to this result (Aydın & Gülçat, 2006). One of the explanations for the differences between perceived maternal attitudes about sexuality with respect to gender can

be the gender role socialization process within Turkish culture. Females and males have been subjected to different traditional cultural norms regarding sexuality; for example, while females are often stigmatized for having sexual intercourse before marriage, males are not and often even condoned for their behavior. This result suggests that females and males internalize different messages from mothers, which, in turn, shape different attitudes and beliefs about sexuality.

The literature clearly indicates that parents play a critically important role in the sexual education and socialization of their children and involvement of parents in sexuality education is essential for supporting sexual health of the children. Therefore, it seems essential for Turkish parents to be sensitive as to their roles in the sexuality education of their children and educate themselves regarding sexuality in helping their children to develop healthy sexual attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, parents should be concerned about intervention efforts aimed at increasing their knowledge and skills about sexuality education and encouraging or increasing parent-adolescent communication about sexuality for both health professionals and policy makers in the field of health.

This recent study contributes to the literature by replicating the results of earlier studies about the role of gender on attitudes toward premarital sexuality, also by providing information about the role of gender on parental communication and perceived parental attitudes about sexuality in Turkey. However, there are some limitations to this current study. Because of the self-reporting nature of the study and use of convenience sampling, there may have been sampling biases as the participants who did not feel comfortable with the sexual nature of the study may have chosen not to participate. In the present study, participants were only asked whether they discussed sexuality-related issues with their parents, but they were not asked about the topics or content of such discussions.

Future studies should examine the topics and content of sexual discussions between parents and children. Finally, in order to gain a better understanding of how the parental variables, with both mothers and fathers, influence the lives of young adults in Turkey, there is a need for more research, including different variables such as general parenting style and parent-child relationship, which consists of parental control, parental warmth or support, parent-child relationship quality and connectedness or closeness, direct parent-adolescent communication about sexual behavior, indirect parental communication, and parental sexual attitudes (Kotchick et al., 2001).

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